

Joann Byrd

It's All

In the Diary

The personal diary George Bush kept as the Iran-contra scandal was coming to light?

What The Washington Post saw first in the excerpts was that when Mr. Bush wrote, "I'm one of the few people that know fully the details," it was "months before . . . Bush said he had been 'out of the loop' on the covert dealings with Tehran."

In another Post story, the diary entries "show that he was more active

Ombudsman

than previously known in trying to contain what became the biggest political scandal in the Reagan-Bush administration."

But the same transcript suggested to the New York Times that Mr. Bush "was indeed unaware of crucial aspects of the episode."

The Associated Press story in the Baltimore Sun started, "George Bush apparently knew in the early days of the Iran-contra affair that a presidential document stored in John M. Poindexter's safe contained a secret provision that hid the arms sales to Iran from Congress."

And the Los Angeles Times found the diary excerpts "largely supporting Bush's earlier statements that he was 'out of the loop' on the Iran-contra affair."

I mean, these are news reports of the same documents.

Maybe the Boston Globe's more precise characterization was it: "Excerpts from then-Vice President George Bush's secret diaries and his grand jury testimony . . . raise doubts . . . that he did not know the Reagan White House was trading arms for hostages in the Middle East. But the records . . . support Bush's claim that he was unaware of the illegal diversion of profits from the Iran arms trade to Nicaraguan rebels."

Or perhaps the story's not what Mr. Bush knew and when he knew it, but what the Philadelphia Inquirer led with: "As . . . scandal . . . was erupting around him . . . a frustrated and uneasy Vice President George Bush was seeing 'blood in the water' and wondering what to do."

Those are the main points of stories

published last weekend, but not all the dueling interpretations.

The New York and Philadelphia papers ran large portions of the actual excerpts, but they didn't choose the same days, nor the same sentences from the days they both selected.

Those excerpts give no clue to what Mr. Bush knew when he wrote, "I am one of the few people that know fully the details." The Post apparently took it that he knew more than he admitted publicly. The rest of the sentence—"and there is a lot of flak and misinformation out there"—led the L.A. Times to characterize it as a confident Mr. Bush "dismissing the early, sketchy details."

All these papers reported that Mr. Bush said he first learned 16 days after the "know fully the details" entry that funds had been diverted to the contras.

Mr. Bush was depicted both as blindly loyal to then-President Ronald Reagan and as debating Mr. Reagan's stance.

It's not that readers got totally different stories. All these papers said the diaries show Mr. Bush worried that the scandal would damage his political future. Most of the papers reported that he wanted to take a polygraph and direct an investigation of the diversion, that he was reminded of how Watergate came out and complained, "the vice president has no power, and yet I am the one damaged."

The Post made the most of his pleading faulty memory in the deposition, and it alone thought "trying to weather the storm" was a diary theme. Only the Wall Street Journal recorded his thinking it would help that he "didn't panic, didn't run, didn't duck away from the president."

The Globe soloed that Mr. Bush wrote of being told "to beware of [Oliver] North"; the New York Times, that he favored a special prosecutor. The L.A. Times alone reported he told the special prosecutor that when he heard of the diversion, "I felt like I had been hit in the gut."

And all of that just proves:

- As the Wall Street Journal put it, "Some entries are ambiguous enough to provoke differing interpretations."
- If the media are going to carry out their purported conspiracies, they will need some practice.
- You find what you're looking for.
- What constitutes "news" still eludes definition.
- Newspapers should run, with their portrayal, the full text.
- At least on some stories, it's good to read more than one newspaper.